

End of Wonderful Di

Diana, Princess of Wales, died in the small hours of Sunday in Paris. She was killed along with her friend, billionaire Dodi Fayed in a car crash.

End came to her at 36 and the picture of her that will endure will have eternal youth about it — something to make up for the full life that has now been denied her.

May God accept in all grace, kindness and indulgence this wonderful and erring handiwork of His.

Presto, Education Ministry

The eleven-member task force formed last April to probe into the heart of darkness that prevails in our education system has done its job.

That our education system is grossly mired in corruption is the general impression but how many fathoms deep has it gone is something that one has to look for in the report.

The problem that we are pitted against vis-a-vis education sector is in essence, a moral crisis. Unless this crisis is taken on in a forthright manner, all other aspects of our national existence — politics, economy to name a few, will be affected beyond repair.

This is not the first time that a task force or a probe committee has come up with a comprehensive picture of what is wrong in our education system and what is to be done to right it but the education ministry of the past governments did have neither the time nor the inclination to take corrective steps.

The Big Question

A roundtable held in Dhaka on Saturday recommended a 21-point suggestion to improve our healthcare services. Dhaka once had been a city of mosques — till the early forties it had about a thousand of them.

Maintenance and monitoring are activities unknown to Bangladesh. Absence of these pervades all areas of our national life. Particularly, perhaps, the healthcare sector — and so very spectacularly too.

The last point included government duties and VAT at an unbelievable rate of 90 per cent of the base price. Even BPC is known to have suggested reduction in government duties and VAT to hedge in price hike.

Paradoxes of Peace

South Asia's political and security dynamics are so intricate and the interests of the nations are so interwoven and interdependent that it has been seldom possible in the past for any single nation to extract much advantage from a position of strength

TRADITIONALLY, peace has always been bargained and achieved from a position of strength. It was seldom given on the platter by any contender in a conflict. In the military, we were told that to have peace one must prepare for war.

In South Asian context, the CBM is not only a recent phenomenon, it also has a mixed bag. Call it a CBM or not President Ziaul Haq's Cricketer diplomacy with his unscheduled trip to India to watch an Indo-Pakistan exhibition match in Jaipur contributed a great deal towards diffusing tension in the wake of India's Brasstacks exercise in 1987.

But a major pioneering venture was made in the field by an American think-tank which conducted a widely publicised meeting in February 1994 under the title: Conflict Prevention and Confidence-building in South Asia. The highly attended meeting by experts and analysts discussed at length the various aspects of Indo-Pak nuclear crisis of 1990 at the height of Kashmiri uprisings and the CBMs undertaken during the stand off.

Soon after the crisis of 1990 was averted, India with I.K. Gujral as its external affairs minister proposed a package of CBM followed by certain proposals from Pakistan. It could initiate a series of talks resulting in at least two agreements including one about the advance and truce information to each other on military exercises and troops movement.

Yet when the two prime ministers' Male meeting checked and was followed by still more positive gestures from either side, there were unfortunate contradictions with regard to ground realities. Just when a hot line was through between the two prime ministers and the foreign secretary level talks was resumed after its breakdown in 1994, almost simultaneously Prithvi's state-of-art surface-to-surface missile headed for Jullundur, only 100km from Pakistan's border.

Because Prithvi has been designed and manufactured as a 'Pakistan-specific' missile, it has been perfected after as many as 15 test-firings to be employed against targets in Pakistan. It is reported that Army is slated to receive 75 Prithvi SS-150s in the initial phase and the IAF has an order for 25 Prithvi-250s. To make the most optimal use of this limited but potent weapon system it is imperative that the employment philosophy of the Prithvi was already thoroughly discussed and debated by the professionals. Such notion was reinforced when the Times of India, in its Feb 2, 1996 edition, carried the headline that 'India will go ahead with Prithvi deployment'. So, asked by local and foreign journalists when Prime Minister Gujral expressed his ignorance after the revelation about the deployment of Prithvi and promised to pack them back he was simply trying to salvage an imperilled Indo-Pak dialogue aimed at confidence-building. If

not anything else. India also has American anxiety to be placated. Within the framework of MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime) enforced since late eighties the US has been exerting a lot of pressure on the India's political leadership to discontinue the testing and deployment of the missiles. The US pressure was intensified following the last test-firing of the Prithvi on January 27, 1996. Despite this, at various level of India leadership it was asserted that it reserved the right to deploy the weapon as and when the national security would so demand.

Pakistan's response to Prithvi's deployment has been predictable. When Prithvi was first test-fired in early 1991 Pakistan was in desperate search of a comparable tactical missile. Her indignity was developed Hafiz I and Hafiz II did not in any way match the medium range Prithvi which can fire at a range of 350 km, with a 250-kg warhead. Pakistan's fear of Prithvi was somewhat allayed with her acquisition from China of M-11 missile whose range is comparable to Prithvi's. Both can be made operational with little delay and fired from simple launcher. According to India's research and Development headed by Dr Abul Kalam, 'Prithvi is now probably among the world's most accurate missile of its class'. Nevertheless, there were media reports that Pakistan also, in anticipation of Prithvi's forward move, had deployed her M-11 missiles near Indian border and the missiles of both the countries were pointing at each other. India's northern command, however, denied the report perhaps to restore the atmosphere for ongoing Indo-Pak dialogue.

Prithvi, it is claimed by Dr Kalam, has been a pride production in India's missileology. M-11 missile which Pakistan has acquired from China in the face of stiff resistance from the US and India is also the pride possession in the country's arsenal. Both can be carried by vehicle in crates and deployed in no time. It is thus immaterial whether they are actually in their operational positions or not.

The report of Prithvi's deployment has been able to already vitiate the overall security environment of South Asia. Although Pakistan has not suspended the current peace initiative, Prime Minister Sharif had gone circumspect and wrote to UN Security Council's five permanent members reminding them of their special responsibility in preserving the region's peace and security and urged them to call upon India to exercise restraint. Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub dashed off a letter of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Pakistan's foreign ministry cautioned that the region could ill-afford a missile race and expressed the country's resolve at the same time that it would in any case address its legitimate security concerns by taking all necessary measures to meet any threat.

South Asia's political and security dynamics are so intricate and the interests of the nations are so interwoven and interdependent that it has been seldom possible in the past for any single nation to extract much advantage from a position of strength. It is geopolitical imperatives and demographic dissonance with ethno religious overlappings making the nations vulnerable to each other in some way or other, notwithstanding its asymmetry giving India a commanding position. If Pakistan can train and send her Hizbul Mujahideens across the border to fight in Kashmir, India also send her saboteurs to bind with equal immunity to fan unrest in the province. Now if the arch rivals of the subcontinent would like to target each other with their missile, its net casualty would be the CBMs in progress. It may snap the tenuous communication link between the two nation drifting them away from each other.

The cynics, however, suggest that there is still the last resort for peace — the doctrine of deterrence — even if the CBM falls. To them, today a nuclear deterrence of sorts already exists in South Asia with all its perils and potentialities. And it has been able to keep at least a cold peace in the region for more than twenty-five years. In the case of other weapons of mass destruction, a nuclear deterrence can be created. It would further reduce the chance of a war breaking out although a cold war may be raging indefinitely in this region.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

More a Controversy than Goodwill

Begum Zia went to a wrong place at a wrong time that led to a wrong impression among the people. What a pity, any foreign visit of our dignitaries, in or out of power, creates bad precedents and raises eye-brows.

IT is neither ethical nor wise to comment on unconfirmed news or hearsay. So, the newspaper reports linking Begum Khaleda Zia's visit with the "discovery" of the presence of two accused in Bangladesh murder case cannot be the subject of serious discussion. After the denial by the Pakistan High Commission the matter should rest there. But the problem is whether true or false this is being widely discussed in different circles. Moreover, when a rumour is spread it takes time to subside and by the time it does the damage is already done. The damage in the present case affects the Opposition political party and its leader Begum Khaleda Zia.

The primary question asked is why was it necessary for Begum Zia to visit Pakistan now? The timing is wrong, the criticism is so much as against our Prime Minister's long stay in the United States on the plea of being present during the birth of her grand-daughter. One wonders what would have been the reaction in BNP circle if Sheikh Hasina had made a trip to Delhi during anti-Khaleda movement.

Begum Zia left the country after several announcements about "launching movement" against the Government or party in power. Just immediately before her departure she called for a general strike or hartal throughout the country. Her departure meant that she did not take the hartal seriously and by the time it was raised public opinion against the issue on which was supposed to create adverse reaction. The issue obviously was the increase in the price of petroleum. It had always been propagated against the opposition political parties that they had been agitating against the present government without taking into account any serious or particular issue.

At last here was an "issue" that was handed over in a platter to them by the Government. Whether the ruling party accepts the fact or not, there was a general discontent against the sudden rise in the petroleum price. It is assumed that BNP could not cash in on this discontent due to the absence or sudden departure of its leader. The 'hartal' became a routine affair, not an opposition movement that it was supposed to be. In totality there was no impact on the political scenario. Keeping aside this situation at home, what will Begum Zia achieve from her visits abroad, especially to the United States via Pakistan? Notwithstanding the visit itself, the way it was reportedly "arranged" has also created suspicion among a greater section of the people. According to reports in certain press, obviously no friend of Begum Zia and BNP, two leaders in the party known for their anti-independence activities in 1971, arranged this trip and accompanied her to Pakistan. More significant is the fact that the Prime Minister of our country, who is the head of the Government, has yet to enjoy the hospitality of the Pakistan Government. Maybe, she had already been invited to undertake a visit, maybe not. But many in this country believe that it was quite undiplomatic, if not unwise, for the Pakistan Government to give priority to the leader of the Opposition. Maybe, it just happened that the Opposition leader's visit came earlier coinciding with her proposed trip abroad. But the occurrence appeared odd in view of the division in feelings among the people in this country after the 1971 genocide.

Then the alleged coincidence or reportedly unconfirmed report about the presence of two alleged murderers of Bangabandhu in Pakistan

has created further controversy, if not confusion, especially when the trial is going on and the Awami League leaders are directly and indirectly accusing the opposition party that the latter wants to thwart that trial. So, Begum Zia's visit is being considered in a perspective different from being a mere goodwill visit. The ruling party is now trying to divert the attention of the nation to this incongruous situation. Government gave the opposition the petroleum issue and contrary to that Begum Zia has given a handle to the ruling party to be in the offensive and to divert people's attention. It is now evident from the statements and counter-statements that BNP has fallen back to the defence line in a particularly embarrassing situation. The question is, whose making is it? An inopportune decision of the BNP policy-makers or successful maneuvering of the ruling party's publicity machinery?

What is most surprising is the late response from Pakistan to the debate in which it had also played a part. Only after our Foreign Office sought an explanation from their High Commission here that a belated denial was issued. Perhaps, the Pakistan Government had not taken the whole affair seriously or it does not keep track of the sentiment of the people over the killing and the trial. This is even more conspicuous when no official clarification has come from Islamabad about Begum Zia's "official and state visit" as claimed by BNP. The rumour surrounding her meeting with one of the alleged murderers of Bangabandhu was gaining ground for sometime past. For whatever reason it may be. If the visit was arranged for creating goodwill between the two Governments or the peoples of the two countries, there is no doubt it has boomeranged.

One other vital question has been raised why our leader of the Opposition did not meet her counterpart in Pakistan nay the Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto. This omission may not appear to be insignificant if the whole context of the controversy surrounding Begum Zia's US visit has also become controversial in view of the bickering and sectarian quarrels among the Bangladeshis in organising the conference that Begum Zia is supposed to attend. The corollary that is hard to find is whether Begum Zia went to USA to be in Pakistan on her way or she went to Pakistan on the plea of US visit. Whatever be the reason, it can be said with assertion that Begum Zia went to a wrong place at a wrong time that led to a wrong impression among the people. What a pity, any foreign visit of our dignitaries, in or out of power, creates bad precedents and raises eye-brows. This time there could be even a diplomatic row had not the Pakistan Government categorically assured that no alleged killer of Bangabandhu would be allowed to enter or stay there. However, a thorough probe is necessary as to the origin of the news or the rumour. The probe has to be done by those whose reputation has been damaged immensely — Pakistan Government and BNP. As for BNP the denial must come from Begum Zia herself. But the Pakistan Government is in an advantageous position to do that through its intelligence agencies. Since the news of alleged meeting between Begum Zia and an accused in the Bangabandhu murder trial has reportedly been published in a Pakistani newspaper also, the people of Bangladesh may seek further assurance through such a probe.



On My Honour

ABM Musa

OPINION

Guarding the Image

As an educated citizen not interested in politics, but as an observer for 50 years, I would urge the politicians (they are urging us day in and day out to do things which they can't do) to watch their negative image, and to try to improve their persistently negative image. The President of the country is also not happy (as we read him in the press), and 'A Citizen' came up with the right points in his opinion published in The Daily Star on Aug 10. Why these feedbacks are ignored?

Abul M Ahmad

As an educated citizen not interested in politics, but as an observer for 50 years, I would urge the politicians (they are urging us day in and day out to do things which they can't do) to watch their negative image, and to try to improve their persistently negative image. The President of the country is also not happy (as we read him in the press), and 'A Citizen' came up with the right points in his opinion published in The Daily Star on Aug 10. Why these feedbacks are ignored?

The standard of politics is low, for which the main and direct responsibility falls upon the political leaders. They are supposed to lead us, the nameless silent majority — and here one of the latter is criticising them. Our patience is reaching its limits, even if we have been accustomed to the poor and tottering service standard of politicians for decades. They criticise the invasion by the non-politicians who come into power and ruled the country for more than a decade.

The question is: why did they allow it if they were so good and strong in running the state? There is no point in shifting the blame on others, but their own weaknesses have to be admitted, exposed and analysed, not only by others, but also by themselves. There is nothing like self-assessment.

Of course, we the citizens have also to share the blame. Why did we allow an autocratic regime to run for nine years, and then toppled it within a

couple of weeks? The hypothetical question is why it took nine years and not, say, three years? The statecraft is supposed to be run by a breed of professionals called politicians. The latter may be asked why other professionals (like soldiers) can come and run a different profession (statecraft)? And why there should be an ad hoc caretaker government for a few months consisting of civilian non-politicians? What happens to this credibility?

The politicians have not been answering this basic question in a fair and square manner. The trouble is that the politicians speak too much politics all the time, and do not know how to speak non-politically now and then (a leader should be an all-rounder).

The nation has another weakness — the intellectuals or the non-political leaders have failed to remain free, independent, and neutral, so as to be able to criticise or praise without fear or favour. They are supposed to keep the politicians within reasonable and fair limits. This check-and-balance factor is not working properly in our society, due to polarisation. The causes should be analysed and corrective steps taken, in national interest.

How to do it when the politicians seem to control all the sectors of the society. There is a reason for this surrender by the non-political influential

groups: somehow the people believe that politics can solve all the problems of the society. When this attitude or mindset changes? What are the preconditions? I am not an expert to answer these questions.

This is generally the attitude in the emerging countries, which have to pass through phases of political instability for the culture and nurture of the correct political practices, whether it is named democracy or something else. Our politicians have to develop a political culture themselves, as this problem is within their own profession (no point in blaming others).

The trend we see is different. There is migration of the intellectuals from one profession or speciality to other areas (bureaucrat, soldier, and academic to politics). But the politicians hardly change their profession! This needs to be analysed at the intellectual level.

The masses are passing through severe strain and fatigue induced by the games the politicians play. Surely the politicians do not wish that we lose faith in them and cease to give them the benefit of the doubt? I am not talking about political parties, but about politics in general.

The political leaders should publicly respond to the situation depicted above, so that we may understand them better, and support them in their sincere nation-building efforts. Go for a better image.

SOS

Dr Sabrina Rashid

more and more are continuously moving from the villages. So they must be taken care of in their village homes. So that they do not get so desperately poor as to think of moving to the towns, where they get into even worse situation. But they do not understand that, as long as they can scrimp a little food in town, to satisfy their gnawing hunger.

Nothing much can be done for this generation of slum-dwellers. But we must think of their children — the coming generation. If they never fails to give you a prick, you never get to this pitiful sight — of half-clad little children, of dingy slums and of half-starved faces. It never fails to move you, however much you have seen it. In fact, it is even embarrassing at times, to enjoy the luxuries of life, surrounded by people who do not even have the basic necessities.

Can't we do something to change their lot? Much as the NGOs are trying, their number and plight is still on the rise. Reason is

citizens and also to learn how to take care of themselves and their families, when they grow up. In this way, since the present is lost to us, we can at least make the future of these unlucky little ones, who suffer for no fault of their own. And, slowly and slowly after years and years of suffering they turn to crimes. Who can then blame them for that?

The garment industry has thrown them out back on the streets with no job, no cash and therefore no food. Added to that, they are free to do whatever they want to, except go to school, which they should, but cannot. Therefore, as an idle man's brain is a devil's workshop, they think of and learn all the bad things. At least, they were busy and learning a trade and had their tummies full while working. Now they have none. Western countries think that they have done a great job by putting a stop to child labour in Bangladesh, but they have not, unless they make arrangements for the well-being of these children whom they have thrown back on the streets. Otherwise, they have done more harm than good to them.

To the Editor...

Price of petrol. The cost of petrol consumers. The rise in crude oil price reported from USD 22 to USD 27 per barrel (93 per cent) and devaluation of Taka by 10 per cent or so in the recent years do not justify a phenomenal price rise of 60 per cent in the price of petrol.

The unusual rise in the price of petrol will very adversely affect the people. Would the government reconsider the issue and act rationally?

S R Ahmed, 62 Siddeswari Lane, Dhaka

Allocating flats. Sir, First, besides the nominal monthly deductions from pay, a lump sum may be collected as down payment on receipt of the government sanction letter. This amount may be Tk 3000 for the class IV employees and Tk 10,000 to Tk 15,000 for first class officers.

This will bring a crore of taka to the government at an instant. A fund can be set up from this recurring income for building fresh government flats. Secondly, mere ownership of land or residence should not deter an allottee from buying the flat he or she occupies. The particular merits of a case should be assessed. Some inherited or owned property will never be possessed by an allottee as it has passed into the hands of a neighbourhood handsman. Winning a case in court is useful, less, for the miserably poor will make life unbearable for the government employee. Such properties have to be written off as gone forever. And the unfortunate allottee can be awarded the flat permanently with no violation of the principle of natural justice.

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How unlucky we are that we have such a large number of down-trodden humans all around us. It is no comfort that with God's grace, we have a decent place to live in, decent food to eat and decent clothes to wear, when they have none at all. After all, they are human beings like us — so, why should they be in such inhuman state? Is it any consolation that we live in comfort and luxury, while they suffer so? It certainly is not.

Nowhere else in the world one is constantly reminded of suffering humanity, as in our country. You cannot help but see them wherever you cast your eyes. And it never fails to give you a prick, you never get to this pitiful sight — of half-clad little children, of dingy slums and of half-starved faces. It never fails to move you, however much you have seen it. In fact, it is even embarrassing at times, to enjoy the luxuries of life, surrounded by people who do not even have the basic necessities.

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Raihanul Islam Banani, Dhaka.